# Collectivism and Individualism in Japanese Schools

by
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# 日本の教育制度における集団主義と個人主義

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## Introduction

In recent years the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture has stated that its policy will be to make changes in the educational system that will foster respect for the individuality of students. It might be useful to consider this new individualism in a broad sense to be a counterbalance to the group-oriented or collectivist nature of the traditional Japanese class-group (*gakkyuu*) system and Japanese society in general. Perhaps it would also be helpful to reconsider the usefulness of collectivism in education in light of this new emplasis on individualism. In this paper, an overview of the educational philosophies of Rousseau and Makarenko will be presented in an effort to suggest that it might be desirable for both individualism and collectivism to be utilized together for different purposes in Japanese primary and secondary education. Rousseau and Makarenko were chosen because their philosophies clearly represent the fundamental differences between individualism and collectivism in educational philosophy.

## Rousseau's Educational Philosophy

Rousseau stressed in *Émile* that education should focus on the child and not on the subject matter. The child is to be at the center of education, and the child's needs are primary to education. This means that education should be adjusted to meet the needs of the child, and not the other way around. This change in the center of the educational process changes the role of the teacher from that of authoritarian figure to provider of learning experiences. Instead of molding the child into some preconceived external pattern, the goal of education becomes that of allowing and enabling the child's inner potential for educational development to grow in its own way.

Traditional education (from Rousseau's viewpoint) is unacceptable because it forces the child to become a good citizen; by doing this the child is educated for others and not for himself. Education must be the development of the child for

himself: individual education. Individual education allows the child to develop his own innate natural goodness without the corrupting influences of corrupted society. This development, when completed, acts as a barrier to keep out the corrupting influence of society when the child is finally (inevitably) allowed to join it. Thus the "natural" goodness of man is preserved.

According to Rousseau, training young people how to function efficiently in adult society is not the point of education. He might be opposed to organizing a class into a hierarchy of groups under the leadership of a few select students and the teacher, and to a system of difficult entrance examinations which seeks to give all students a common experience of hardship that teaches them to value effort and perseverance. Experiences with class groups and difficult examinations may help students to develop social skills necessary to function in a group-oriented society such as Japan, but they also seem to sacrifice individual development for the sake of making good citizens, and therefore run counter to Rousseau's ideal.

## Rousseau's Individual

A child educated according to Rousseau's ideals will have as his primary motive self-love (concern with personal well being), and he will not yet be able to see things from the point of view of others, thus freeing him from their prejudices and preventing him from being enslaved to their opinion of him. This is not to say that the child is selfish, which implies that other people's well being is trampled for personal gain.

Thus the most important result of this type of education is to preserve the child's natural freedom and goodness in the form of a naivete of society. At this stage (around twelve years old) the child has developed enough curiosity (or rather has not had his curiosity and lust for learning dampened by the rote memorization and dehumanization of traditional education) to be introduced to the problem-solving method of inductive learning. Learning must come from within the child, as the result of experience and observation, and not from textbooks or lectures. Life Science Studies (*Seikatsuka*) in Japan shows a strong influence from naturalist educational philosophy such as that of Rousseau in its methods and emphasis on the individual (Nakano 1990: 36, 174).

## Strengths of Rousseau's Philosophy

Rousseau's main contribution to educational philosophy is that he moved the center of education to the child. According to Bowen & Hobson (1974: 130) this has lead to several important innovations and trends in progressive and other schools of education, most of which are highly influential in American education:

1. appreciating the value of discovery learning and problem-solving as educational

techniques;

2. confining the child's early learning to things that are within his own experience and therefore have meaning to him;
3. stressing the rights of each child to individual consideration, freedom and happiness;
4. realising the need to understand the child's nature and the way this develops through childhood and adolescence, and using the knowledge of this in determining what he should learn at each stage of his development; and
5. treating the child as a being in his own right, not just as a miniature adult, and therefore stressing the enrichment of his present experience rather than preparing him for some distant future.

These can be considered very powerful strengths in Rousseau's thought. However, there are some weaknesses as well. Rousseau stresses learning from experience not learning from others, and his delay of education suggests that he thought that there is no need for training in the fundamental disciplines of knowledge, which will be necessary if one hopes to learn effectively through problem-solving. "If, for instance, it was true that Sir Isaac Newton was prompted to work out the law of gravity because of the apple falling on his head, it was only because he had the necessary scientific background and training to be able to recognise this as an instance of general scientific law." (Ibid: 129)

Rousseau does not recognize the value of acquiring a basic grounding in the various methods of thought and fields of knowledge. Rousseau says that what the child does not recognize as useful need not be taught to him, however it would seem that background knowledge is necessary in spite of this. "Contrary to what Rousseau says, it is not always obvious to the child what is in his own interest and often it is not until he has been taught a certain subject that a child will appreciate its value... if the child always knew what was in his interest and how to learn it, what need would there be for the teacher?" (Ibid: 129) It would thus seem unwise to take individualism to the extreme that Rousseau did, forsaking the group and the authority of the teacher completely for the sake of keeping the child in a "natural" state, free from the corruption of society.

## Makarenko's Educational Philosophy

Makarenko's primary concern was the creation of the "new Soviet man" through education. He developed his theory as a means of applying the thoughts of Marx and Lenin to education. The goal of Soviet Communism was the creation of a classless society which requires everyone to be equal and contribute to society as much as possible. Work, especially manual labor, was accepted and held in high esteem, and was to be performed by all people in a positive manner. Makarenko's task was to develop education to produce citizens who would live their lives by the principles of

communism. To do this, he determined that education should teach the subordination of individuality to the common good of the collective. Children must be taught to value labor and learning as inseparable, and that these are the keys to a communist society.

Although Japan is not a communist country, it too had to mobilize its society to rebuild the nation after World War II. Both the Japanese and Makarenko had to educate a future workforce that would be capable of sustaining industrial modernization and reconstruction of the nation after a major war. The group-oriented nature of Japanese society together with a group-oriented system of education helped to make Japan's postwar success possible.

## Makarenko's Collective

In *Problems*, Makarenko says of discipline, "...discipline is freedom...Discipline in a collective means perfect security for every individual, complete confidence in his right, his abilities and his future." (Ibid: 240-241) Character and morality were more important than intellectual and cognitive ability for Makarenko. The former are important because they lead to the attainment of communist morality. The school was a collective with the goal of developing communist morality in students. Discipline is the means to instill this morality. Discipline is not merely reward and punishment. Instead, it is moral, benefits both collective and individual, and is manifested in a "highly structured predictable school routine." (Ibid: 222)

The collective is the wider group to which the individual must defer his actions, beliefs, desires, views, and ideals. This is to train individuals to act cohesively and harmoniously in a group. Individuals work for the collective, and the collective receives credit for individual success or failure. It is up to the members of the collective to deal with the problems of the individual members through discussion and criticism. The collective is presented with a challenge or goal and a set of obligations, and the members have to work together to meet these goals and duties. Duty and self-discipline are instilled in the members of the collective. When a collective can discipline and regulate itself from within it becomes a mature collective and success has been achieved.

The collective makes individuals interdependent. This is an echo of communist society, in which each industry is interdependent with the other, and workers within these industries are interdependent upon each other to create a final product. Specialization is undesirable in that it leads to the division of the body of society in the same way that class differences do. Members of a communist society need training in all aspects of society, and all around growth is the goal.

The Japanese recognized the usefulness of Makarenko's collective, and it was discussed in the 1959 meeting of the *Zenkoku Seikatsu Shidou Kenkyuu Kyougikai* ("National Committee for Student Guidance Research"). Sugiyama (1988: 318) states that Makarenko and Soviet education had a great influence on Japanese education.

The *gakkyuu* system, with its leaders (*kaku*) and squads (*han*), seems to have been heavily influenced by Makarenko's collective.

## Strengths of Makarenko's Philosophy

The primary strength of collectivism is its potential to develop self-discipline and the ability to be considerate and harmonious in relations with others. Through experience in a collective, respect and concern for others can be developed in the child, morals which are central to the understanding of justice and the maintenance of harmony in a group-oriented society. The potential for collectivism to transform the words "self-discipline" and "consideration" into reality is based on the fact that a moral commitment to these virtues is required for a good collective to function. Cagan (1978: 249) suggests that the goal of collectivist education is to train children so that sympathy for others determines their actions as much as the ability to think.

The weaknesses of Makarenko's philosophy are summed up by Bowen and Hobson (1974: 225) as "How...can any creative criticism or growth take place? The continued preoccupation with meeting a set of rigid external goals, as expressed in daily behaviour, and with maintaining the subordination of the individual to the collective, appears to provide for no kind of innovation whatsoever. Indeed, there seems to be no provision at all for the institutionalisation of change or reform, much less for criticism. As such, Makarenko's theory of education, in the long run, is covertly coercive and maladaptive."

## Common Aspects in Rousseau and Makarenko

Although these two philosophies seem to be diametrically opposed to one another, it appears that they may share several common aspects. Bowen (1962: 192) notices several similarities between the ideas of Makarenko and Dewey, who developed many of Rousseau's ideas. "Both, for example, saw education fundamentally as a group process, with discipline a group function; both saw the teacher as a more mature person, charged with the task of simplifying the external social order and of presenting and manipulating it in order that the young will be able to take on the values and morals of the wider society; both saw great value and dignity in work and argued that labor, along with all forms of creative endeavor, was of the highest educational value, producing the completely cultured, roundly-developed person."

Another similarity between the two philosophies lies in the concepts of the general will and the will of the collective. Rousseau's general will absorbs all private wills and all individuals must obey this public or general will. His experimental thought child, Émile, was kept from society to develop his natural freedom because Rousseau felt that the society of his day was corrupt. If he could restructure society to his ideals, and he lays out a plan for this in *Social Contract and Considerations on the Government of Poland*, then there would be no need to isolate Émile in the first place

because society would not be corrupt. Émile must learn to replace his natural freedom with civil or moral freedom upon coming of age.

According to Blits (1991: 403), Émile's civil or moral freedom comes from resisting his inclinations [showing self-discipline] and obeying the law [the will of the collective] that he has given himself by belonging to society [a collective]. This description is closely parallel to the description of the collective and its workings; the terms this author has placed in brackets parallel the terms used by Blits and emphasize the similarity. In describing Rousseau's social contract and general will, Blits (Ibid: 403) states, "While everyone is subject to the collective will of the community, no one is subject to the private will of another person; and the force of law, like the necessity of nature, is felt equally and impersonally by all." Interestingly, this statement could also be used to describe Makarenko's collective. Perhaps it could be inferred from this similarity that emphasis on the individual and emphasis on the group are not so opposed that it would be impossible to use both at different times in order to instill in students the positive values taught by both methods.

## Discussion

Parents in Japan feel a need to instill in children morals that reflect both collectivist and individualist approaches. The collectivist value of preparation for entrance into society as well as the individualist value of independence are given nearly the same emphasis by parents in a survey done by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture in 1994. "The most frequent response was 'broad-based abilities that will enable them to function as members of society' (39.5%), followed by 'the ability to learn for themselves throughout their lives' (30.6%)." (Monbushou 1994: 20)

The collectivist *gakkyuu* system does well in teaching students how to behave in a group-oriented society. However, that is no longer considered to be sufficient for good education. The Ministry further states that education must change in order to emphasize the individual. Independent thought, independent judgment, and better problem recognizing and solving skills are becoming increasingly necessary in children in order to equip them for the future.

It may be advisable to consider the opposite side of the coin for the sake of caution: the problems arising from an educational system that is too individualistic. Individualism can be overemphasized and overvalued. The culture of the United States is a clear example of a culture valuing individualism in education. However, many schools in fiercely individualistic America are generally considered to be in bad shape. This is especially true of inner city schools, where some teachers carry weapons to defend themselves from students armed with guns and knives, and metal detectors have recently been set up in the entrance ways of many schools. Drug abuse and teenage pregnancy among students are also huge problems in the U.S. There is "...increasing crime and violence in the schools, ...decline in achievement test

scores, and ... [a] huge number of dropouts from the school — about 1 million per year over the last two decades. More and more of the students who do pass through the system and actually graduate are still functionally illiterate." (Ignas & Corsini et al 1981: 31)

In Japan, student attacks on teachers are a problem, with 929 separate cases of this in 1983, and with other incidents of school violence rising to 2,125 in that year (Schoppa 1991: 271) However, these figures are tiny compared with 282,000 incidents of student violence in a peak year, and 1,000 attacks on teachers monthly in the United States, which has only double the population of Japan. (Duke 1986: 186)

These problems suggest that a primary motive of self-love and an inability to see things from the point of view of others, extolled as virtuous by Rousseau, seem to have been overemphasized in America to the point where selfishness has taken control. Children in the U.S. may have come to the point where they are so free from the "prejudices and opinions of others" that they feel they are under no obligation to be considerate to others at all.

It would seem that individualism in American schools has gotten out of hand, and that a measure of respect for the group is necessary in American youth. "It is estimated that students forget over 85 percent of what is learned in the classroom, but that their peer relationships of youth are remembered for a lifetime..." (Ignas & Corsini et al 1981: 31) Perhaps American youth need moral education to teach them responsibility, consideration, and self-discipline; if this teaching involved their peers, as collectivism does, it would have a lasting effect. Collectivism may have an important role alongside individualism in the future of education.

## Conclusion

It appears that the current trend in Japan is toward increasing individualism in education. This can be considered a much-needed change for the betterment of the country. However, it might be argued that both collectivism and individualism have something valuable to teach students about themselves and society. Nevertheless, it may be impossible to use both of these methods simultaneously. Perhaps there should be a period in a child's education reserved for each method.

Independence is a characteristic that can be attributed as important in the maturation of a young adult from the previous state of being totally dependent on the family as a child. In parallel, it would seem to be a logical progression in a child's education to have collectivist training in the virtues of interdependence precede individualist training in independence. Therefore, this author suggests that it might be beneficial to consider a system in which kindergarten and elementary school would be primarily collectivist, with training in individualism beginning gradually near the end of elementary school and beginning of junior high school, leading to a primarily individual-centered approach in junior and senior high school. If used well, this author believes that collectivism has much to offer children as a learning experience

in which they can develop consideration toward the group and self-discipline, and collectivism could complement the current trend toward fostering individual development in Japanese education, which shows a growing regard for the value of individualism in education.

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